

# Inspection of Bath and North East Somerset local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 9 to 13 June 2025

**Lead inspector:** Amanda Maxwell, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children in Bath and North East Somerset (BANES) continue to benefit from good-quality support, help and services that have a positive impact on their lives. Senior leaders have a thorough understanding of the quality of support and services and have continued to make improvements since the time of the last inspection in 2022. This includes how well families are supported to keep children living with them when safe to do so, and the quality of work to reunify children with their families. Although some action has been taken by leaders to address the areas for improvement noted at the last inspection, these are not embedded or having the impact they need to. The response to children who go missing, the consistency of support to care leavers aged over 21 and the quality and impact of supervision and management oversight are not fully effective.

## What needs to improve?<sup>1</sup>

- The effectiveness of return home interviews with children who go missing from home and care. (outcome three, national framework)
- How well all care leavers, especially those over 21, are provided with support from personal advisors (PAs) and understand the care leaver offer. (outcome four, national framework)
- The consistency and quality of management oversight and supervision. (enabler two, national framework)

## The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. Children in BANES receive the right help and support when needed. Social workers know children well and spend quality time with them, building meaningful and trusting relationships.
2. Most children and families benefit from timely support from a variety of targeted early help services. Early help assessments and plans are clear and focus on the needs of children and families. They are written in language which families understand. Children and families participate in the creation of their plans, and this helps everyone to understand what is needed to support children to thrive. When needs escalate, circumstances are reviewed, and children are supported at the appropriate level.
3. When children are referred to children's services, they are given appropriate priority based on their presenting level of need and risk. When concerns are significant, swift and appropriate action is taken to ensure that risk is understood, and children are safeguarded. Children benefit from a timely, detailed and effective initial assessment of their needs. Enquiries are thorough and include a detailed exploration of children's histories. Additional information is sought from partner agencies and used effectively to inform analysis and decision-making. Managers apply robust oversight and decision-making at every stage.
4. The emergency duty team is a responsive service and meets children's needs well when concerns arise outside office hours. The service responds quickly and appropriately to urgent issues and focuses on ensuring that children are safeguarded.

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<sup>1</sup> The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

5. Children's assessments, including pre-birth, are of good quality. They reflect purposeful engagement with families and include a detailed and considered analysis of risk and history. Most are completed in a timely manner and contain clear recommendations and management oversight.
6. The response to children affected by domestic abuse is effective. Social workers understand the impact of domestic abuse on children and act swiftly to reduce risk. Adult victims receive appropriate support, intervention and access to services. They are helped to understand the impact their relationships are having on themselves and their children. Social workers work collaboratively with a range of partner agencies to understand and respond to the risks posed to children. When safe to do so, children are supported to maintain relationships with parents from whom they are separated.
7. When concerns for children escalate, strategy meetings for children at risk of significant harm take place in a timely manner. Meetings are well attended by partner agencies, and they consider risk and threshold for each child. Decision-making and actions are appropriate and in line with presenting risk and worries.
8. Children benefit from child in need (CIN) and child protection (CP) plans that are detailed, target needs and risk, and are easy for all to understand. They provide clarity about what needs to happen next for children, with time-bound actions and consideration of contingency plans if circumstances change for the child.
9. A wide range of services support children and families to address needs and behaviours. Family group conferences (FGCs) and the New Way service, which works with families to enable them to meet their children's needs, have a positive impact for families. They enable families to gain additional support from wider family members, to develop their insight and to make changes to their parenting, which positively impacts on the care they provide to their children. When parents make changes and risks to children reduce, children step down from child protection plans and remain at home under a CIN plan.
10. Senior leaders have focused on strengthening the support provided to children to help them to remain living with their families when it is safe to do so. The innovative 'fostering families' service provides bespoke and creative support to families and has successfully enabled children to remain living at home. It has prevented families from needing higher levels of intervention and support, and children from coming into care.
11. Children's CIN and CP plans are regularly reviewed. Parents and children are engaged in reviewing plans and contribute meaningfully to meetings. Reviews provide clarity of progress and plans are updated to reflect changes in the child's needs and circumstances. Interventions, goals and actions address individual children and carers' needs. Child protection chairs provide valuable oversight of the progress of CP plans via the midway reviews. This helps to avoid drift and delay.

12. The response to children who go missing from home is not well coordinated. Some children benefit from timely conversations with a worker about the reasons they are going missing. This helps workers to understand and develop plans that help to reduce episodes of going missing. Senior leaders are aware that the response being provided to children is still not consistent enough and have plans in place to address this. However, progress is slow and strategies to improve this are not making the difference they need to.
13. Children at risk of exploitation receive robust, intensive support from the adolescent and child exploitation (ACE) team. Social workers build meaningful relationships with children and help them to understand their needs and vulnerabilities. Workers use direct work purposefully to reduce and manage the risk to children.
14. Disabled children receive bespoke help and support from knowledgeable social workers who understand their unique needs and vulnerabilities. Meetings for disabled children are well attended by a range of multi-agency partners who actively contribute to progressing children's plans and reducing risk and concerns.
15. Decisions to escalate intervention and support via the Public Law Outline pre-proceedings stage are appropriate. Clear and concise letters to parents detail the concerns and the support they have been offered so far. Legal planning meetings provide a clear rationale for decision-making and next steps. Senior leaders regularly review and track progress to ensure children's situations improve within the child's timescale. Early help and support work well in enabling families to step down to lower levels of intervention.
16. Education leaders have robust systems in place to monitor the safety and well-being of children who are missing education or electively home educated. There has been effective work by the virtual school to reduce the number of exclusions and suspensions for vulnerable children in need.
17. The local authority designated officer provides a comprehensive response to managing allegations made about professionals.
18. Children who live in private fostering arrangements have their situations appropriately assessed and overseen. There is detailed consideration of children's needs and carers' suitability.
19. Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless receive a needs-led and child-focused response to their situations. The protocol for assessing homeless 16- and 17-year-olds is out of date and does not reflect the good practice being undertaken by workers or statutory guidance and legislation.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care: good**

20. Most children come into care at the right time and when it is in their best interests. When children cannot remain with their parents, there is early

consideration of the identification and assessment of children's kinship networks. This ensures that children remain with their extended family when it is safe to do so.

21. Social workers invest time in building strong, trusting relationships with children, taking care to get to know them well and understand their individual needs.
22. Independent reviewing officers provide regular oversight of children's progress and advocate for children and escalate issues of concern when these arise.
23. Children are helped to achieve their aspirations and are well supported in education, training or employment. The virtual school is effective in identifying the educational needs of children in care and ensuring personal education plans are in place to help them make progress. Children also benefit from accessing a wide variety of social activities which they enjoy.
24. There is some variability in the frequency and quality of recording in some children's care records. This means that children's records are not always sufficiently clear to gain a current understanding of children's current circumstances. Records do not always support children in later life to understand their experience of care and why decisions were made.
25. Children benefit from creative and engaging direct work and life-story work which helps them explore their journeys into care and begin to gain an understanding of their identities. The need for life-story work for children is recognised, and it is provided at an early stage of planning.
26. Most children live in safe and suitable homes that meet their needs, and they make good progress. They achieve timely permanence with carers, which helps them to feel secure and settled in their homes.
27. The physical and emotional health needs of children are understood and met. Children's plans clearly address their health needs and carers support children to access the appropriate help and healthcare.
28. Managers and social workers thoroughly consider the full range of placement options to ensure they meet children's current and long-term needs. Senior leaders are aware that sufficiency of homes remains a challenge, and this limits their options to meet the needs of children under 10. Senior leaders acknowledge that this is not what they want for these children, and they need to do more to ensure they have a sufficient range of homes to meet need and demand. Unregistered children's homes are rarely used, and only as a last resort. There is clear senior leadership decision-making and oversight of these arrangements, in line with children's needs and vulnerabilities.
29. Children are supported to stay in touch with family members and there is good consideration of children's important relationships. The lifelong links service

ensures that relationships are explored and maintained, which helps children understand their identity and support network.

30. Disabled children in care receive a child-centred response from committed and skilled social workers who know them well. They live in homes which meet their needs and make progress in their lives. When disabled children in care are transitioning towards adulthood, their needs have not always been assessed by adult care professionals soon enough. Senior leaders are working to address the earlier engagement of adult services to better support and plan for children ahead of their 18th birthday.
31. Most children who are deprived of their liberty have their needs regularly reviewed and overseen by professionals in the team around them. They are living in suitable homes which meet their needs.

### **The experiences and progress of care leavers: good**

32. Care leavers develop trusted and positive ongoing relationships with their PAs and feel safe to turn to them for support when they get into difficulties. PAs are strong advocates for their care leavers and ensure that their voices and views are heard and responded to.
33. PAs know their care leavers well and provide them with the practical help and emotional support they need. Some care leavers are not allocated a PA early enough to enable them to build a trusting relationship before they reach the age of 18. Through the work of the lifelong links workers, care leavers are helped to be in touch and reconnect with people from their past who are important to them.
34. Most pathway plans are written with care leavers and appropriately identify their needs, and the actions needed to help meet them. Most plans are kept up to date, and most importantly include realistic goals that care leavers have set themselves. A small number of pathway plans are not reviewed with care leavers, and some are not shared with care leavers. This means that some care leavers do not understand the offer of support. Management oversight has not addressed these shortfalls in practice.
35. PAs provide effective help to care leavers to make sure their health needs are well met. PAs accompany care leavers to appointments such as talking therapies to address historical trauma in their early years. Helpfully, there are some services which target emotional well-being/mental distress and when needed, specific therapy services are spot purchased. Senior leaders are aware that aspects of the commissioned emotional health offer are more limited and have plans to address this.
36. Care leavers benefit from a comprehensive local offer that is easily accessible via an easy-to-use app which translates into different languages. Some areas of the offer are still under development to be more ambitious for care leavers, for

example the emotional health offer, and to ensure all care leavers have equal access to help with council tax. It is not always clear how care leavers are updated and informed of their rights and entitlements on an ongoing basis.

37. Care leavers who are parents receive practical help and support to be prepared and ready for the arrival of their children.
38. PAs are in regular contact with care leavers who are in custody. This ensures they receive the right support and assistance to enable them to positively settle back into their communities once released.
39. Care leavers who arrived in the UK as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive support from knowledgeable and caring PAs who ensure they are fully supported to make applications regarding their immigration status and to settle in the UK.
40. When care leavers reach 21, they can choose whether to continue to access the support from their PA. However, a small number of vulnerable care leavers who would benefit from having ongoing support do not have an allocated PA and they may not understand the offer of help available to them. There is some inconsistency in how well this has been communicated to them by PAs.
41. Most care leavers are supported to recognise risky situations and are helped to understand how to keep themselves safe. PAs work effectively with specialist services, including the Willow team, who provide early support to help children and young people understand risk outside the home. This helps care leavers to understand the risks and vulnerabilities. Care leavers are supported to develop strategies that help them to stay safe in the community.
42. Care leavers are well supported to access and engage in education, employment and training. Care leavers access additional support which prepares them for work. They have focused one-to-one support helping them explore a variety of opportunities in line with their individual aspirations for the future. This may include seeking an apprenticeship or gaining additional skills.
43. Care leavers live in safe and suitable accommodation which meets their needs. There is a clear accommodation pathway which ensures that they move into the right type of accommodation that meets their needs. Many care leavers are supported to remain living with their former foster carers.

## **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good**

44. There have been recent changes in the children's services social care senior leadership team. A new director of children's services has been recruited and is due to arrive later in the year. Positively, clear and effective interim leadership arrangements are in place to maintain the progress of children's services improvements.

45. There continues to be a strong corporate commitment, recognition and prioritisation of the needs of children and families in BANES. The additional investment by council leaders to further develop and improve services for children is making a positive difference to their lives. As a corporate parent, the council takes its responsibilities seriously and is continuously looking at how to improve their response, support and services to children in care and care leavers. Children's views are used effectively to help shape service development.
46. Senior leaders continue to work diligently and collectively to address areas that they identified as needing to improve. The accurate self-assessment identifies key areas of practice which require further improvement and development, alongside the key areas of which they are proud and which they celebrate. They are not afraid to try new approaches and encourage innovation and test out new ways of working with children and their families. Leaders are open and transparent about the key areas of performance which are not yet at their desired targets and identify what they are doing to address this. Leaders know they have more work to do to reach their goals.
47. There is a diverse range of activities which contribute to the quality assurance framework. This supports staff and leaders in their understanding and oversight of the quality and impact of practice. Leaders decided to pause audit activity during a period of corporate review, which reduced their oversight of the impact of practice for children. Audit activity is not yet being fully used to ensure that it drives the quality of practice. Leaders acknowledge and have plans in place to address this.
48. Leaders work positively and collaboratively with partner agencies and there is a good shared understanding and collective response to need across the partnership. Strong constructive relationships with the judiciary and Cafcass have improved the response to children and families who are subject to legal processes.
49. A minority of children's care records are not up to date and do not reflect the current circumstances, management oversight and supervision. There are many conversations, panels and other forums in which children are spoken about, and key actions are agreed. However, these are not consistently reflected in records. Leaders have recently invested in new technology with the aim of supporting practitioners to improve the quality and timeliness of record-keeping.
50. There is regular and strong participation activity and consultation with children in care and care leavers. This is used well to inform services and support. A 'lived experience group' has also been set up for children and adults to share their experiences of services with leaders. This is being used effectively to help shape and influence the social care reforms agenda within BANES.



51. Social workers enjoy working for BANES and speak positively about their experiences. They feel well supported by managers and get the right help, support and direction they need. Social workers and practitioners make excellent use of the practice framework to support and inform their practice and intervention. There has been significant focus and investment to embed this across the whole service.

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